

CLASSIFICATION SYSTEM

Executive Order 11652, dated 8 March 1972, entitled "Classification and Declassification of National Security Information and Material" sets forth the classification standards for the Executive Branch of the Government.

Under this Executive Order official information which requires protection against unauthorized disclosure in the interest of national defense or foreign relations of the United States is classified in one of three categories -- TOP SECRET, SECRET or CONFIDENTIAL.

TOP SECRET -- refers to that national security information which requires the highest degree of protection. The test of assigning TOP SECRET classification is whether its unauthorized disclosure could reasonably be expected to cause "exceptionally grave damage" to the national security.

SECRET -- refers to that national security information which requires a substantial degree of protection. The test for assigning SECRET classification shall be whether its unauthorized disclosure could reasonably be expected to cause serious damage to the national security.

CONFIDENTIAL -- refers to that national security information which requires protection. The test for assigning CONFIDENTIAL classification is whether its unauthorized disclosure could reasonably be expected to cause damage to the national security.

Under the General Declassification Schedule set forth in E.O. 11652, TOP SECRET information is automatically downgraded to SECRET at the end of the second full calendar year following the year in which it was originated; downgraded to CONFIDENTIAL at the end of the fourth full calendar year and declassified at the end of the tenth full calendar year.

SECRET information is automatically downgraded to CONFIDENTIAL at the end of the second full calendar year following the year in which it was originated, and declassified at the end of the eighth full calendar year.

CONFIDENTIAL information is automatically declassified at the end of the sixth full calendar year following the year in which it was originated.

Since certain classified information may require some degree of protection for a period exceeding that provided in the General Declassification Schedule, provisions are made in the Executive Order to allow specific exemptions that are consistent with national security requirements.

All classified information becomes automatically declassified at the end of thirty full calendar years after the date of its original classification except for such specifically identified information which the head of the originating department or agency personally determines in writing at that time to require continued protection because such continued protection is essential to national security or disclosure would place a person in immediate jeopardy.

Executive Order 11652 provides that the originating department or other appropriate authority may impose special requirements with respect to access, distribution and protection of classified information, including those which relate to communications intelligence, intelligence sources and methods and cryptography. Under this authority, compartmentation systems have been set up within the Intelligence Community to provide additional protection to foreign intelligence sources and methods.